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For Viet vets, a new cause in Nicaragua

By GUY GUGLIOTTA

Huntsville, Ala.—In their youth they fought and bled in the paddies and jungles of Vietnam. It was a simple life for those who embraced it, a cause.

In the 1970s they came home, bad guys and good guys, picked up the thread, got jobs, married, had children, learned—often imperfectly—how to cope in a complicated world where their exploits went largely unappreciated.

Today, creeping into middle age, a group of them are seeking redemption in Central America, battling Communism.

"Most of us Vietnam veterans had a bad taste about losing in Vietnam," said Tom Posey, a tall, balding redhead who sells wholesale produce for a living. "We know we would have won if they had let us win. America has to have winners."

In July 1983, Posey and a few friends, over coffee, war stories and gun talk, formed Civilian Military Assistance, a shoebox organization designed to gather war material, food and medical equipment for those who fight left in Central America.

ON SEPT. 1, James Powell, of Memphis, and Dana Parker, of Huntsville, Ala., both 36, both divorced, both dedicated members of Civilian Military Assistance, were shot down and killed in a small helicopter over the forests of northern Nicaragua.

They were the organization's first casualties in a new war. Yet, for the victims and their friends it was perhaps the same war—good guys, bad guys, the wild tropical terrain, the Roman candle hiss and blam of a well-aimed rocket, the fire and, finally, oblivion in a hostile wilderness.

Civilian Military Assistance is a Central American "solidarity group."

Posey, a director, says the group can count on more than 1,000 adherents in the Midwest and South.

The majority of them are male, about 35 to 45. About 90% are Vietnam veterans.

The Nicaraguan government claimed Parker and Powell were mercenaries paid by the CIA, but Posey says that the two Americans and a Nicaraguan rebel companion were on an unspecified "rescue mission" when Sandinista soldiers shot them down.

NONETHELESS, Civilian Military Assistance is a potential paramilitary force. It has the requisite skills and experience and the desire to use them. What the group lacked, at first, was a clear idea of events in Central America.

In fact, Posey said, Civilian Military Assistance shifted its attention to Nicaragua only after the Salvadorans refused to give it official sanction.

"At first, we didn't even know there was anything going on in Nicaragua," Posey said. "We thought contras (anti-Sandinista rebels) were the Communists."

But they read up, and in January made an approach to Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, the defense minister in Honduras, where the rebels of the CIA-funded Nicaraguan Democratic Force had staging areas.

Posey says Civilian Military Assistance and its brother organization, Civilian Refugee Military Assistance, specialize in cornering supplies—not guns or ammunition—and buying them at cut-rate prices. He claims the organization has "saved" the Democratic Force \$60,000 to \$70,000.

AFTER THE Democratic National Convention, Posey said, the organization acquired a new dimension.

"When (Walter) Mondale announced that he would stop the contras 100 days after taking office, our phone started ringing off the hook," Posey said.

The calls were from volunteers—more than a thousand of them. They were not inquiring about collecting old clothes and toys, but about fighting.

"We feel that we can handle our battle as long as we have the means," said Mario Calero, who represents the Democratic Force in New Orleans. With the end of covert U.S. government funding in May, "the means" have become more important.

Calero and Posey acknowledge that 15 members of Civilian Military Assistance have visited Nicaragua since January.

Parker, a Huntsville police detective, had first traveled to Nicaragua in January and was back for a second visit when he was killed.

POWELL WAS a professional pilot who was shot down three times in Vietnam.

Calero denied that the men of Civilian Military Assistance are paid or have any relationship "whatsoever" with any U.S. government agency.

He described Powell and Parker as "all heart."

"Nobody who ever went down there came back with anything," Calero said. "They left their jackets, their slickers, their boots; they never came back with anything except the clothes on their backs."

For Posey the reasons are simple: "We've lost in Vietnam and we don't like it. We want to win."

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